

The Christian News-Letter

Edited by
J. H. OLDHAM

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DEAR MEMBER,

An event which may have a greater significance in world history than we realise at the moment is the conference now taking place at Delhi. Representatives of eleven of the Governments of the diverse peoples united in the British Commonwealth are taking common counsel—Australia, Burma, Ceylon, East Africa, Hong-Kong, India, Malaya, New Zealand, Palestine, South Africa and Southern Rhodesia. Representatives of the Dutch East Indies are in attendance as observers. Bonds forged by the necessities of war may outlast the emergency which created them. This war is being fought to save from destruction some of the essential values of western civilisation, but the ultimate problems of human society are not merely European but world problems. Those who realise this will be stirred by the latent possibilities of good in this drawing together of representatives of the peoples of British, Asiatic and African stock bordering on the Pacific and numbering together not less than 500,000,000 souls.

This integration of effort, as *The Times* rightly insists, is characteristic of the vitality and spontaneity of the British Commonwealth which differentiate it from every other system. It is a living, organic growth, whose "cells respond instinctively to every change of conditions, forming ever new combinations and developing ever new activities to adapt themselves to new circumstances." It would be a confusion of thought and misuse of terms to ascribe to what is taking place any specifically Christian character. But it has its springs in a tradition that owes far more than men today realise to Christian inspiration, and the spirit of free, spontaneous activity accords with the Christian understanding of human responsibility and the worth of the individual, of which tyranny and the cult of power are a flat denial.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY FREEDOM?

A year ago in the preliminary number of the News-Letter (No. O) I suggested that one of the greatest dangers against which we have to be on our guard in time of war is the black-out of mind. In the matter of free speech and discussion Parliament and the Press have during the past year exercised a praiseworthy vigilance. Against the equally real danger of mental torpor induced by weariness and depression the only protection is a resolute will not to succumb. Every one who goads us to think about vital issues is our benefactor. Among those who are rendering this service Mr. Middleton Murry occupies a high place. He has not only an acute and sensitive but an unusually sincere and honest mind. Whether his conclusions are right is not the point; he resolutely refuses to evade, or to allow us to evade, the crucial issues.

The *Adelphi* for October contains a challenging article from his pen. He finds a deep contradiction in our national aims, and this ambiguity confuses the whole meaning of the struggle. We know that we are fighting at great cost in defence of freedom, but we are too indolent to make clear to ourselves that there are two kinds of freedom, not only different but often flatly opposed. Some of the issues in Mr. Murry's paper need a

good deal more clarification, but he speaks as a prophet demanding that the nation should face questions to which an answer must be given, it may be even in order to win the war, certainly in order to win the peace. The same theme of the different meanings of freedom was the subject of one of the recent broadcast talks by the Archbishop of York, published in *The Listener* of October 3rd.

Both the Archbishop and Mr. Murry agree that the essential freedom is freedom of conscience—freedom to choose the right and to obey God. Only through this freedom can man develop his true nature ; it is by the exercise of responsible choice that we become persons. The maintenance of this freedom is equally necessary to the well-being of society, since only thus can society grow through self-criticism. This liberty is not so much a claim for rights as for freedom to fulfil one's responsibilities to God and one's neighbour.

But freedom may also be understood as freedom to do exactly what we choose—to pursue our own ends and selfish interests regardless of others. This self-assertive freedom has its place and function in society, in so far as it is a revolt against tyranny, injustice and privilege. But given free rein it can only produce a society which, in the words of the Archbishop of York, is "a welter of competing selfishnesses."

The fundamental sickness of western society is that its sense of values has become perverted ; in religious terms, it has turned to the worship of false gods. It has allowed the economic interest to become predominant. It is consequently in the economic field that the destructive, self-assertive freedom has worked its chief havoc. Communism, Nazism and Fascism are, each in its own way, desperate attempts to find a way out of the resulting disorder. As Reinhold Niebuhr argued in the Supplements to C. N.-L. Nos. 11 and 16, they are wrong answers to unsolved questions. They have tried to put an end to the anarchic freedoms of modern society by denying freedom altogether ; to repress individual egoisms by substituting for them a vast collective egoism. They are attempting to cast out Beelzebub by Beelzebub. These false solutions of an unsolved problem can be overcome only by finding a truer solution.

The true answer is that of a society which is seeking to build its life on the freedom of all its citizens to be persons. One of the outstanding manifestations of self-assertive freedom has been the claim to do what one likes with one's own property. Not only the person but property has been regarded as sacred—not merely some kinds of property but property as such. But, Mr. Murry argues, "where possessions are recognized as having an inherent claim on the tribute of society, personal freedom is really unattainable for the vast majority." Economic arrangements are a means ; a healthy society is one which is constantly prepared to criticize and review its means in the light of its ultimate purpose.

This country is fighting to safeguard vital human and religious values ; the instinctive knowledge of this holds our people together. It has also travelled a long way, since the industrial revolution began, in limiting economic freedom in the interests of the human person. But to meet the supreme test which now confronts us, all this, Mr. Murry maintains, is not enough. We are hindered by a divided mind and infirmity of purpose. We can win through only by a bold and fateful choice. The greatest danger to all that we most value is not the evil of the wicked but the weakness of the good. Salvation lies in getting rid of the double mind.

THE TREATMENT OF CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTORS

A good many disquieting reports are reaching us about the treatment of conscientious objectors. First, there are letters about men who have been registered by tribunals for non-combatant service and have been arrested for refusal to obey orders and sent to a particular prison camp. Several of our members have written about men whom they know and esteem. The accounts of their treatment in this camp are shocking and recall

some of the inhumanities of Nazi concentration camps. I refrain from giving particulars since the matter has been raised in Parliament and the Government has announced an enquiry. It was suggested in the House of Commons that such matters should not be raised in public, since they afford propaganda for the enemy. The fact that they can be publicly discussed is, in fact, the best propaganda for our cause; it sets in the clearest light the difference between the dictatorships and the free institutions of this country where, if a wrong is done, public opinion can assert itself to get it put right. People in neutral countries are quite able to form their own opinion which system makes for human welfare and progress.

When military service was made universal, this country, in contrast with the practice of the leading countries on the continent of Europe, granted constitutional recognition of the rights of conscience in the case of those who satisfied tribunals of the genuineness of their objections to war. More could hardly be expected of the secular state. But what of those to whom exemption has not been granted and who have been registered for the army or for non-combatant duties and refuse to carry out orders? By what means can the will of the community be enforced? Not to enforce it means the breakdown of military discipline, on the maintenance of which the safety of the community depends. It has been the recognised practice of armies to impose the death penalty on those who desert their post in battle or disobey orders, for the good reason that by such action they imperil the lives of their fellows. From the standpoint of a community whose existence is at stake the sternest measures against breaches of military discipline are necessary.

The sternest measures—but not acts of brutality. That is the vital distinction. Severe penalties, even the death penalty, need not infringe the dignity of man. But callous inhumanity is a flouting of man's nature made in God's image, and brutalises those who give rein to it. No community can tolerate it without degradation.

Secondly, there are reports about the dismissal from their posts of those who hold pacifist opinions. This matter has already been dealt with in the News-Letter (Nos. 41 and 43). It will keep us from hasty and crude generalisation to remember that the pacifist attitude, like everything human, includes many strains, some good, some bad. I have met pacifists with whom it is hard to have patience because of their dogmatism and intolerance, their inability to understand the paradoxical and tragic nature of human experience and unwillingness to see any point of view other than their own. I have been told of others whose unbending devotion to principle makes them refuse to lift a finger to remove heavy burdens from the shoulders of their fellow-men, lest their own righteousness should be compromised by the remotest association with war. It is not strange that such an attitude should arouse the resentment of those who are spending their strength and risking their health in the service of their fellows, as it evoked from Christ His severest denunciation. But among the pacifists whom I know there are also men and women who are impelled to this position by the purest and loftiest motives of Christianity and of patriotism and are among the worthiest citizens and noblest lovers and servants of their fellows of whom this country can boast. It is folly for the community not to avail itself of the services which their conscience allows them to give. Particulars have been sent to me, for example, of an experienced worker serving under a Children's Welfare Committee, who has been forced to resign on account of her pacifist views. What gain is it to win the war, unless we can make a better and happier world for children? And if that be true, is it not stupid, when there are so few to serve them, to deprive them of the help that a trained social worker can bring?

I need not repeat the arguments already advanced in the News-Letter against the penalisation of the holders of unpopular opinions. They find confirmation in the statement of the Minister of Labour that he takes "very strongly the view that when the House carries a law giving to any minority a right, it is wrong for another citizen to try by

individual action, either by endeavouring to starve the man or otherwise, to depreciate that right."

This is a matter about which it is vital that we should think clearly. What kind of a world might conceivably justify the cost of the present war? An essential part of the answer is that given earlier in this letter—a world in which men and women are free to be persons; free, that is to say, to be true to what they believe to be the highest, even if their judgment should be mistaken. The state cannot give unqualified recognition to this freedom, since the individual may err, and to allow the individual to be a law to himself would be anarchy. A nation fighting for its existence cannot sanction activities that would contribute to its defeat. But a wise community will never forget that the loyalty of individuals to truth and conscience is among the most priceless of its possessions. Members of the News-Letter can do much to create a sound public opinion by taking up any unwarranted denial of freedom of conscience within the circle of their influence and getting it put right.

THE RENEWAL OF LIFE

I began this letter with a reference to an event which reminds us of the never-ceasing struggle between the forces of destruction and creation. Where death works, life is at work also. Even the annihilating fury of war may be a period of germination. These happenings in the natural sphere are a parable. They illustrate, and are illuminated by, the central truths of the Christian faith. A recent leading article in *The Tablet* (October 28th) ended with these words: "Corruption cannot be hidden . . . Death is public. But, rebirth, recovery and resurrection, these things begin in private, the small seeds unfolding in the apparently unaltered earth.

Public was Death; but Power, but Might,
But Life again, but Victory,
Were hushed within the dead of night,
The shuttered dark, the secrecy.
And all alone, alone, alone
He rose again behind the stone."¹

Many of our members in renewing their subscriptions have in their goodness of heart sent more than the amount due, as a contribution to general expenses. It is impossible to write personal letters of thanks to all, and those of you who have helped us in this way will, I am sure, accept instead this expression of our warm gratitude.

Yours sincerely,

D. H. Deane

¹ From a poem by Alice Meynell in *Christ of the Poets* (O.U.P.).

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